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Justin Higham - the close up magician

By [Jade O'Donoghue](#)



For anyone hoping to [get into magic](#), taking that first step can be a little confusing - how do you get to be one of the initiated? A magician will generally never show you 'how it's done' so how are you meant to learn? This struck me as quite the conundrum when I myself wanted to learn magic and in looking for a course I wondered if anyone would even be willing to let me in on the secret...

Then I found [Justin Higham](#). Promising to teach some basic tricks over the course of a one to one lesson, when I asked if he could turn me into Harry Potter he explained he couldn't but that I would definitely leave with a novel way of entertaining my friends.

Within minutes, his speed-of-light hand movements, charming yet intriguing manner, and ability to do things I hadn't a chance at explaining assured me this was one expert magician. Not to mention the books he's written on the subject and lectures he's given to the likes of The Magic Circle. Clearly the perfect person to give us an insight into learning magic, and during our chat he demystified it all just enough to make me want to learn more while still keeping the enchantment of it well and truly alive...

So how did you first get into magic?

I got into magic when I was nine. Someone at school showed me a coin and made it disappear. Because he was a school friend, I was in a position to ask how it was done and he showed me and from that moment on I just sort of discovered my whole purpose in life.

After that I got into what we call close up magic, which is sleight of hand done with cards, coins or other everyday objects and I developed it over the next few years. Then, when I was 16 I flew to Chicago where there was a top card magician by the name of Ed Marlo. I'd fly over for a few days at a time and it was a lot of money but that was my education in magic.

I've done magic now for over 35 years, both as a hobby and also performing professionally and giving lectures.

What was it that actually led to you deciding to teach it to other people?

Over the years, I've had many jobs that are not related to magic and it was always a dream of mine to actually set up a business and do magic full time. I'm not sure why teaching appeals to me... both my parents are classic pianists and so they give piano lessons. So I think that sort of thing must be in the blood!

I really enjoy the actual process of teaching people and seeing them learning a new skill. Magic is a very unusual thing, it requires integrating lots of different skills; physical dexterity, mental dexterity, memory, psychology; there are lots of elements that are brought together under one roof. Magic is quite unique in that respect.

Magic is a bit of a secretive area – it's kind of shrouded in mystery – how do other magicians feel about you teaching tricks to other people? Every time I've asked a magician how it's done, they've told me it's a secret!

That's a good question! There's a very fine line between teaching magic and *exposing* magic. So if, for example, you opened a packet of Cornflakes and you find there's a simple magic trick toy in the box, which, you know, sometimes there is, well that would be regarded as exposure because the person eating cornflakes for breakfast has not actually asked or paid for tuition in that magic trick. But if somebody actually comes for a magic lesson then they have paid hard earned money to learn a new skill, and in the world of magic, most magicians appreciate that. They also appreciate the fact that we do need the influx of new people into magic.

Yes, I suppose everyone's got to start somewhere haven't they?

Absolutely!

I remember in our lesson you showed us some and taught us some others - how do you decide which tricks to teach people and which ones to keep to yourself?

To be honest, it really comes down to the ability of the person being taught. You have to accept that a beginner doesn't have the actual skills or the knowledge base to do the more advanced tricks. It's a bit like learning the piano; you can't learn a tune from grade three until you've learnt grades one and two. It's a bit less formal in magic; there aren't any official grades but nonetheless, there are certain skills that need to be developed before they learn the more complicated tricks.

Ah that makes sense!

Yes it's actually less to do with keeping good tricks away from people and more to do with what they're actually capable of doing. It's a skill like any other. I mean, there always has been secrecy in magic and I'd be lying if I said I didn't keep certain things secret - there are certain tricks that I've developed myself that I wouldn't even show other magicians!

So yes, I mean, the secrecy thing would never stop others coming through it. But likewise, when I teach people tricks I wouldn't really want them to go out and show everyone exactly how to do it. Generally speaking people do respect the art of magic when they're learning.

Do you have a personal favourite trick to perform?

Well my personal style of magic is very improvisational. I do whatever magic I feel is best in this particular moment. For one moment it could be one trick, for another it could be a totally different trick. The magic is actually tailored.

Can you give us an example of that?

A basic example is that some tricks require shuffling and revealing cards on a table. Other tricks can be done while standing up without a table. Depending on the conditions, some tricks are better done indoors under certain lighting conditions; some tricks can be done outdoors. It all just depends on the situation you're in.

So part of the skill of the magician is not only being able to do the tricks but working out what one is appropriate at what time?

Yes, exactly. When I teach magic to people I do try to teach them a variety of different things so that they can do tricks under these different conditions.

Do you think that confidence to perform can be learnt?

Yes, they can learn confidence. The thing with magic that gives confidence is practising the magic until you know yourself that you can do it well. Once you know that, it's not a problem. People get nervous and mess up because they aren't inwardly sure of themselves. Practice makes perfect, but it also gives confidence.

What would you say is the hardest thing for people to grasp when they're learning magic?

I think the thing people struggle with is the discipline. I mean, when people come for a lesson like the one you had, I'll teach them something that they need to go away and practise by themselves. If someone comes for an actual course, they will need to devote more time and energy and expect to keep practising the same things for longer.

Also, if, for example, someone's never had instruction in something before, like, a golf or a tennis lesson or something, they might not be used to having someone say, hold this like this, do it like this. It sort of takes them back to school, which some people are not used to.

Good answer! So my last question, what tips do you have for any budding magicians out there just starting out in their journey?

My first bit of advice is go online and find books on it. There are loads - some good, some not so good - I'll email you some suggestions (he did, see below!). My advice will be to jump in anywhere and try and get your head round one or two things. Practise shuffling the cards - even playing cards will help. YouTube videos are useful as well - watch magicians, most I would recommend, beginners won't have heard of so can send you a list (see below again!). When you see these films you get a real flavour of what close up magic is like. Do some research and take it from there.

Thanks Justin!

If you fancy yourself as the next big thing in magic, [a course](#) is the place to start. With one to one courses and group lessons available, you'll find something to suit your learning style. Or, if you want to get

a feel for things before going ahead and booking a course, have a look at Justin's references below.

Recommended reading:

The Royal Road to Card Magic by Hugard & Braue

Recommended viewing (search for these people on YouTube):

Slydini, Bill Malone, Ricky Jay, Rocco Silano, Lu Chen, Ekaterina Dobrokhotova, Dan & Dave

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